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Negotiators Burdened With Distrust

The Reagan administration is putting on a great show of willingness to reach an arms control agreement with the Soviet Union. But the president's negotiators are laboring under a heavy burden of distrust, born of the Soviets' responses to complaints of treaty violations.

The negotiators know the secret history of Soviet violations of SALT I and II. Though SALT II was never ratified, both countries pledged to abide by its terms, and the United States has tried to hold the Soviets to their word.

I can illustrate the U.S. frustration by drawing on a sensitive National Security Council report on the verification attempts of recent years. The report was reviewed by my associate Dale Van Atta.

One provision of SALT II was intended to restrict proliferation of intercontinental ballistic missiles by allowing each side to develop only one new missile. The U.S. choice was the MX, as the Soviets were duly informed.

On Oct. 26, 1982, the Soviets first tested their SS24 missile. They secretly informed the United States that this was their permitted new one.

But four months later the Soviets tested another new missile, the SS25. This violated SALT II. The United States issued a secret, sharply worded protest to Moscow.

The Soviets responded that the SS25 wasn't new but simply a variant of their old SS13. U.S. diplomats pointed out significant differences: The SS13 was a silo-based missile with a single warhead, while the SS25 was mobile with multiple warheads.

By the SALT II definition, a missile with more than a 5 percent difference in throw-weight constitutes a new missile.

The Central Intelligence Agency had determined that the SS25's throw-weight was from 600 to 1,200 kilograms compared with the SS13's 500 kilograms. "Even the lower bound of the SS25's throw-weight is 20 percent above the SS13's throw-weight," the NSC report said.

The Soviets denied that the SS25's throw-weight exceeded the SS13's by more than 5 percent.

Since the Soviets have never agreed to on-site inspection of its missiles, the CIA has to rely on less direct means of estimating the SS25's characteristics. An important part of this sophisticated intelligence gathering depends on the radio signals, or telemetry, that issue from Soviet missiles being tested. By the SALT II terms, such signals are not to be in code.

But in July 1983, the United States protested that the Soviets were scrambling their tests of the new missile.

The Soviets again denied violating anything and suggested that the U.S. figures were wrong.

The CIA rechecked its figures for the SS25. It concluded that its estimate was correct.

On Oct. 12, 1983, the U.S. representative in Geneva stated that "until this matter is satisfactorily resolved, the United States requests that the Soviet Union suspend flight-testing of the SS25."

The Soviets responded 13 days later. They flight-tested another SS25.